

Supreme Court convenes today in Toppenish

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TOPPENISH, Wash. — The state Supreme Court will hear oral arguments today in a case that could determine whether the state's thousands of agricultural piece-rate workers should be paid separately during their breaks.

The state's highest court will convene today for three cases at Heritage University's Smith Family Hall, two in the morning and one in the afternoon.

The afternoon case, scheduled to begin at 1:30 p.m., is Demetrio vs. Sakuma Bros. Farms.

Hired laborers paid by units of work accomplished — bins filled or trees pruned — rather than by the hour argue that their employer should pay them for their rest breaks over-and-above the agreed upon wage, while Sakuma believes the piece-rate wages are enough to cover breaks.

Labor interest groups and farm associations throughout the state and nation believe the nine Supreme Court justices could set a sweeping precedent however they rule.

The Supreme Court, which holds sessions in locations outside of Olympia a few times a year, will kick off the day with oral arguments for two morning cases, which begin at 9 a.m. Those cases involve the rights of a DUI suspect and the age considerations of a second-degree child rape suspect.

All proceedings are open to the public.

Oral arguments are not trials. Instead, justices will hear 20 minutes of reasoning from attorneys for each side — no witnesses, no new evidence that wasn't already part of the trial in whatever court appealed to the Supreme Court. After that, the wait is on for a ruling.

- This article will be updated.